

BLOG POST April 16th 2026

Democratizing electric vehicles in France: yes—but how?

Authors

Mathieu Saujot

Director, Lifestyles in transition

Marion Bet

Research Fellow, Lifestyles in Transition

Simon Louedin

Analyst, Institut Mobilités en Transition

Jean-Philippe Hermine

Director of the Mobility in Transition Institute and Associate Researcher at IDDRI

🕒 Reading time: 6 min



The electric vehicle, a symbol of the decarbonization of the transport sector, has been at the center of intense news coverage in recent months: innovation by manufacturers and growing consumer adoption, set against a backdrop of public controversy over its benefits and political battles surrounding the renegotiation of the European legislative framework. The global energy crisis triggered by the war in Iran has added another layer to an already difficult equation. In this context, how can the rollout of electric vehicles become a truly collective and acceptable project? IDDRI and the Institute Mobility in Transition (IMT) are publishing

today a survey conducted with French citizens which, by revealing existing concerns, perceptions, uncertainties, and needs, provides insight into the “how” of this mobility transition.

Context

Even as electric vehicle sales in France continued to rise year after year,^{[1](#)} momentum toward accelerated electrification had recently faltered in European negotiations. However, international developments have brought it back to the forefront and reinforced its relevance: the war in Iran and its impact on fuel prices have put this transformative ambition back on the agenda. For reasons of strategic autonomy, industrial competitiveness, and purchasing power, it now appears urgent to electrify uses, particularly individual vehicles. The imperative is all the stronger given that inequalities in access to energy, exacerbated by recent increases in fuel prices,^{[2](#)} are already, and will continue to be, politically instrumentalized. The direction is clear: such risks justify promoting mobility tools—and energy systems—that are less vulnerable to international fluctuations, which are likely to become more frequent in an unstable geopolitical order.

Mobility as a (sensitive) pillar of lifestyles

That said, two hurdles—though not insurmountable—may deter those pursuing this ambition. On the one hand, efforts to promote low-carbon mobility, tackle air pollution, and implement related measures have at times seemed to overlook the constraints faced by more vulnerable or limited-income households. As a result, they have sparked social tensions. Low-emission zones (ZFE), for example, have been perceived by citizens as a form of economic discrimination and a barrier to mobility, upon which all daily activities depend: consumption, access to public services, healthcare, work, and more. In other words, some stakeholders view the issue of “decarbonized mobility” as a minefield. On the other hand, China’s technological lead places European car manufacturers, and their entire network of subcontractors, in a highly competitive situation, reviving fears of a new wave of deindustrialization.

In this context, how can a credible pathway be identified to advance an ambitious electrification agenda while also renewing our mobility pact, currently under strain? And how can this project be made both environmentally and socially convincing for citizens, who are seeking new mobility solutions yet worry about being left behind by an overly rapid ecological transition?

A survey of French citizens

To address these questions, IDDRI and IMT conducted a study ([IMT-IDDRI, 2026](#)) aimed at capturing citizens’ perceptions of mobility and electric vehicles. In partnership with the [Observatory for Society and Consumption \(ObSoCo\)](#), four focus groups were held with users of non-electric cars.^{[3](#)} The groups reflected a range of trust levels in political institutions, differing perceptions of being “winners” or “losers” of the transition, as well as diverse income levels and residential contexts.

Our approach to group interviews was designed to be innovative: rather than collecting strictly “sectoral” perceptions of mobility, we sought, building on previous work ([IMT, 2025](#)), to start from the premise that mobility is a core component of our social contract. In this light, the project of transforming dominant mobility practices, through the electrification of individual vehicles, can gain greater credibility and appeal if it is anchored in widely supported social aspirations that extend beyond mobility alone. To explore this, we developed narrative frameworks combining

technical pathways, visions of social and environmental progress, and corresponding policy trade-offs. This approach has proven fruitful in three ways: it enables a deeper understanding of citizens' perceptions and highlights sources of concern; it helps identify viable conditions for bringing the issue into the political sphere; and it supports the design of appropriate public policies. Such an approach reflects IDDRI's broader methodological ambition: identifying the social conditions (context, attachment to certain societal promises, necessary trade-offs, etc.) under which transition policies can gain legitimacy—by better taking into account the perceptions, aspirations, and concerns of the French public.

Key findings

Participants' contributions reveal nuanced discussions, far from the usual polarized debates, and offer a rich picture of existing perceptions, fully documented in the report “How can the electric vehicle find its way through? A new pact with users. A survey in France” ([IDDRI, 2026](#)). While the depth of these exchanges cannot be fully captured here, two key insights stand out.

First, although public discourse is often shaped by narratives that question the environmental benefits of electric vehicles, citizens themselves are not dogmatic. For them, the car is first of all a practical, everyday matter, rather than a source of political or ideological division. Citizens are experts in their own mobility: accustomed to specific, well-mastered uses that underpin their way of life, they primarily seek clear, concrete assurances that any proposed alternative will work. Only under these conditions can they come to see electric vehicles as the “natural” successor to internal combustion engine cars; this sense of continuity must therefore be built through tangible, evidence-based proof.

Second, in a broader context of rising vehicle prices in recent years, electric vehicles, still more expensive to purchase than conventional cars, risk becoming a symbol of two-tier mobility. In addition, the issue of charging, an added constraint in already demanding daily routines, reinforces this concern. During the interviews, participants were quick to point to the growing pressures on mobility; this sense of insecurity fosters a defensive stance and amplifies uncertainties surrounding the rollout of this new technology. Many other elements emerged from these discussions, shedding light on the representational context into which the promotion of electric vehicles is introduced. They highlight the extent to which related policies have at times failed to align with citizens' social and practical realities.

Three conditions for renewing the mobility pact

These rich and nuanced collective discussions point to three key conditions for renewing our mobility pact. First, providing guarantees and tangible proof, such as the availability of charging infrastructure, battery reliability (e.g. reparability indices), operating costs, and electricity prices, to secure the decision to switch vehicles. Second, facilitating access and hands-on experience, as it is through smooth and accessible use that acceptance can develop in practice, in line with the principle “Where there's a way, there's a will” ([IDDRI, 2024](#)). This would require, in particular, expanding the second-hand market through the electrification of corporate fleets, as well as developing social leasing schemes ([IMT, 2026](#)). Finally, electric vehicles must be reintegrated into a broader vision and promise of mobility, encompassing more diversified and better-adapted systems, such as combining express coach services with carpooling. Only under these conditions will electric vehicles, embedded within a wider range of options, become normalized and come to be seen as the natural, and even attractive, mobility solution of the future.

<https://izi-by-edf.fr/blog/voiture-electrique-pourcentage-france/>

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As of 15 April, 2026, and since the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, diesel prices have risen by 34% and petrol by 16% (Roole, 2026, *Daily evolution of fuel prices in France*).

3

In Île-de-France (peri-urban inhabitants, access to collective transport, modest income), Saint-Étienne (peri-urban or rural inhabitants, no access to collective transport, modest income), Bordeaux (urban and peri-urban inhabitants, access to collective transport, average income) and Dijon (peri-urban inhabitants, no access to collective transport, average income).